

Industry Applauds 226,000 km² Offshore Protection Plan

The establishment of a 226,000 km² protected area off the east coast of Australia by the Federal government has brought welcome certainty to the \$23 billion upstream oil and gas industry.

Comprising 13 new marine protected areas (MPAs), covering an offshore area almost as large as Victoria, the initiative has acted to preserve the unique environment of south eastern waters, according to federal Environment and Heritage Minister, Ian Campbell.

"We have also managed to design an MPA network which, through the use of multiple use areas, recognises that the south east is a critical petroleum production area for Australia", Campbell said. "The new MPA network will not prevent prospective oil and gas areas from being explored and developed."

The Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA) has applauded the move, saying it was comfortable with the protection of the new areas while still being able to get on with the job of

accessing prospective waters for oil and gas exploration.

"We have worked closely over many months with the government on this matter and the results provide further evidence of the balanced and co-operative approach by the various parties towards protecting Australia's unique marine assets", APPEA Chief Executive Officer,

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Belinda Robinson, said. "It is most pleasing to see that the government has maintained its constructive, objectives-based approach throughout this process and resisted calls from some quarters to apply an arbitrary and ultimately meaningless target for protecting marine areas."

Campbell said about one-third of the world's marine protected areas are now in Australian waters. "The MPA network is the culmination of extensive discussions with stakeholders,

with more than 120 days of consultation alone since the release of the proposed network in December", he said.

"The new MPA network covers waters off Victoria, Tasmania, far south New South Wales and eastern South Australia and will pave the way for the creation of a national network of MPAs throughout Australia's vast ocean territory. This is a major advance for the protection of the unique marine life of the southeast marine region and, significantly, we have been able to deliver these new marine protected areas with minimal impact on industry."

Campbell said the geological storage of CO₂ has been flagged as an allowable use in multiple use zones in MPAs, subject to meeting regulatory and other requirements. The development of the southeast MPAs started about three years ago and was accelerated in December 2005, when the government released a candidate network of MPAs for consultation. The government will soon start a statutory process to have each MPA declared as a commonwealth reserve. ■